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Letter From Aberystwyth September 2019

Decline & fall in a Welsh town

by Anthony Daniels

Fortune and misfortune on the waterfront.

Aberystwyth, a seaside resort and the seat of the National Library of Wales, could be a kind of metonym for the whole of Great Britain. Once a place of some grandeur and elegance (subsisting, of course, in the midst of severe poverty), it is now given over almost entirely to decay and slovenliness. Every physical addition since the First World War, and even more since the Second, has been ruination and hideousness. The University, whose original magnificent Victorian building stands unoccupied except by detritus that can be glimpsed through its Gothic windows unwashed for decades, is a World Heritage site of incompetent British modernist architecture of such ugliness that one is left clutching one's eyes in despair. Splendid Victorian terraces have been ravaged, and their harmony ruined, by cheap additions to extract a few more square feet of habitation from the land area that they cover. The students, who in term time make up a third of the town's population, no doubt care deeply about the fate of the planet and the future of the environment, but live in squalor, turn everywhere they inhabit into a slum, and wade happily through the litter—principally the wrappings and containers of their refreshments rather than lecture notes—that they drop.

As for the non-student population, its most notable, or noticeable, characteristic is self-abuse. Tattoos and facial ironmongery are much in evidence, as is obesity; and down the promenade waddle slatternly mothers pushing their infants in wheeled contrivances, the insemination of the mothers having been so miraculous, given their size, that it makes the Virgin Birth seem mundane by comparison. Everyone, even the elderly, dresses as if he has risen late on a Sunday morning after a hard night and early hours in the bar, and put on the first crumpled clothes that came to hand and required no effort to don. Self-esteem has completely obliterated self-respect as a desideratum.

A little scene in one of the side streets—the buildings decayed but inhabited—caught for me the spirit of the town, or at least one aspect of the town. A seagull was tearing with its beak a thin black plastic bag of household rubbish that had been put out to await collection in front of a door, scattering the rubbish until it found something eatable by itself. It was making a terrible mess, this

bird, but no one stopped to shoo it away; and what was remarkable about the bird was its self-assurance, like that of the fare-dodgers on the Métro in Paris, as if it were only doing what it had an unalienable ornithological right to do. Certainly it exhibited no fear of passers-by, its boldness presumably the fruit of its experience. And though there are municipal notices round the town telling people not to feed the seagulls, the method of rubbish collection encourages the very thing that the notices forbid. This is modern British (not just Welsh) public administration; and every inhabitant of these islands knows that, however high the local taxes, household waste will never again be disposed of efficiently. Neither the will nor the competence to do so is there.

How terrible a picture, then, of degeneration! And yet I am very fond of Aberystwyth. It is surrounded by beautiful countryside; you can see the green hills from its streets. Cardigan Bay is of a beauty beyond the ruination even of British architects and town planners. The sea has changing colors of its own, not vivid or vulgar like those of the tropics, but more like the palette of painters such as Hammershøi or Morandi, that is to say, ever-changing gray-blues, gray-greens, or just plain gray, with cream for the foam of wavelets.

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Aberystwyth has a small and charming museum whose frontage is like a shop in a shopping street, but which is actually a rather splendid old theater adapted as the county museum. It is, as is customary in such places, a miscellany of Roman coins, stuffed birds, military uniforms, ancient kitchen utensils, pottery of various epochs, geological specimens, local landscape paintings of small artistic merit (but nonetheless interesting), and so forth; but special were the pictures of Welsh preachers, including that of Christmas Evans (1766–1838), so called because he was born on Christmas Day, deeply impoverished and illiterate until the age of seventeen, and blinded in one eye by his band of sinning, erstwhile friends who beat him severely because they were furious at his conversion from drink and lechery to puritanical virtue (his eyelids being then sewn together). Evans toured the countryside preaching hellfire and damnation, which the Welsh—until recent years—always loved. Here, for example, is the opening of one of his most famous sermons, with the encouraging title of "The World as a Graveyard":

> Methinks I find myself standing upon the summit of one of the highest of the everlasting hills, permitted from thence to take a survey of the whole earth; and all before me I see a wide and far-spread burial-ground, a graveyard, over which he scattered the countless multitudes of the wretched and perishing children of Adam! The ground is full of hollows, the yawning caverns of death; and over the whole scene broods a thick cloud of darkness: no light from above shines upon it, there is no ray of sun or moon, there is no beam, even of a little candle, seen through all its borders. It is walled all around, but it has gates, large and massive, ten thousand times stronger than all the gates of brass forged among men; they are one and all safely locked, the hand of Divine Law has locked them; and so firmly secured are the strong bolts, that all the created powers even of the heavenly world, were they to labour to all eternity,

> could not drive so much as one of them back. How hopeless is the wretchedness to which the race is doomed! into what irrecoverable depths of ruin has sin plunged the people who sit there in darkness, and in the shadow of death, while there, by the brazen gates, stands the inflexible guard, brandishing the flaming sword of undeviating Law!

This, indeed, is the very image of modern Aberystwyth as given in an amusing series of books, best read while you're there, by Malcolm Pryce. They are (needless to say) without the theological afflatus of Christmas Evans, and have such titles as *Aberystwyth Mon Amour*, *Last Tango in Aberystwyth*, and *Don't Cry for Me, Aberystwyth*, a story in which a private eye, a Welsh Philip Marlowe, investigates the seamy side of the town, there seeming to be no other apart from the sea-view boarding houses that had once been grand, or grand-ish, hotels:

> In the old days, as with all hotels with pretensions to grandeur, the door had been opened by a man dressed as a cavalry officer from the Napoleonic wars. But he had long since gone and today I had to push the heavy brass and glass door open myself. Inside the lounge, little had changed. . . . And the same cast of characters: . . . in the bay window sat members of that travelling band of spinsters and widows who spent their lives wandering from hotel to hotel. . . . Shrivelled old women who appeared at the same time each year with the predictability of migrating salmon and who insisted on the same room and ordered the same food. And every day at dawn they crept downstairs to place their knitting on the vacant armchairs signifying possession for the day like the flag on Iwo Jima.

Quite so: through a bow window of one of the boarding houses next to mine on successive evenings I watched an old lady in a fluffy woollen dressing gown consume her dinner with a glass of wine, concentrating on what she was doing with a frightening intensity.

A woman artist . . . strapped a sheepskin to her back and cameras to various several parts of her anatomy, and crawled on all fours over the moors where sheep might usually safely graze.

The museum had a special exhibition when I visited—on sheep. Sheep, of course, are very important in Wales, much of the land being suited to nothing else, there being more sheep than humans in the Principality. There were etchings of sheep by various artists, including Henry Moore, and a video of a woman artist who decided that she wanted a sheep's-eye view of the world, such that she strapped a sheepskin to her back and cameras to various several parts of her anatomy, and crawled on all fours over the moors where sheep might usually safely graze. The film of her crawling over a babbling brook and through the heather made one ask, "Is this serious?" One never knows with contemporary artistic endeavor. To judge by the commentary, it *was* serious; at any rate, it was funny.

The public was asked to pin on a board their comments on the question of *What Sheep Mean to Me*. "Woolly locusts." "The main livelihood of my patients." "Lewis says stop eating sheep but I won't." This, of course, raises the important question as to whether it is better to have been born and eaten, than never to have been born at all. As for the exhibition itself, someone demanded, "What about the cows?," and another said, "This is exactly what I wanted to see, an exhibition

about sheep"—a masterfully ambiguous statement, if I may say so.

But of course it was the people of Aberystwyth whom I most appreciated. The owner of my boarding house stood in the parking space outside it to prevent anyone else from taking it before I could back into it. Everyone was equally helpful and friendly, ready to put themselves out for a complete stranger. There was something comfortable and almost comforting about the town's lack of pretension, the lack of ambition, as if the people were content with life as it was and had decided to take no thought for the morrow.

Rivalries are intense in human goldfish bowls such as Aberystwyth.

Of course, I wouldn't pretend that it was a town of saintly Samaritans—no town is. Miss Marple said that there was a great deal of wickedness in an English village, as indeed there is everywhere. We went, my wife and I, to a Moroccan restaurant. Actually it was Algerian, but as the owner, an Algerian, pointed out, no one in Aberystwyth has heard of Algeria. It is very instructive to talk to someone such as he, for then you begin to realize how many remarkable people there are in the world. How does one go from being a teacher of French and Arabic in a secondary school in Algeria to being the owner and chef of a restaurant in Aberystwyth? He had been in Wales for forty years, and on the wall of his restaurant were the flags of Algeria and Wales, by strange coincidence of the same coloration. He loved his adopted country, which speaks well of it.

But he had a small problem with which he asked our help once we had finished our meal (the tagine was as good as I had eaten anywhere). There was a wicked person in the town who regularly posted bad reviews of his restaurant on TripAdvisor and managed to insinuate them to the top of the list so that they were the first any tourist looking for a restaurant would see. As the tourist season was about to begin, this was very important to him. He thought he knew who it was—a competitor, who put someone, or some people, up to denigrating his establishment. We were happy to oblige, of course, by posting a very favorable review on TripAdvisor for we genuinely liked him and his restaurant; and then I thought that there was, perhaps, more social realism in the novels of Malcolm Pryce than I had supposed. Rivalries are intense in human goldfish bowls such as Aberystwyth.

We met quite a few foreigners who had settled in the town, and they all spoke warmly of it and of its people. My short sojourn there (not my first) confirmed for me the truth of Pope's brilliant summary of the human condition:

Created half to rise and half to fall;

Great Lord of all things, yet a prey to all;

Sole judge of Truth, in endless Error hurled:

The glory, jest and riddle of the world.

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